



## Discussion Questions on Poverty and Inequality

In the United States, millions of people live in poverty. Over half the population of the U.S. will be poor at some point in their lives.

- When you go to the grocery store, do you have to pay attention to the cost of the items you purchase?
- Have you ever had to pay attention to what the items cost and then walk away?
- Do you or have you ever had to buy only a partial tank of gas?

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One quarter of all jobs in the U.S. pay less than \$10.55 an hour or \$22,000 a year for a full time worker. They also come with few, if any, benefits like health insurance or even paid sick days. If you lived at the federal poverty level—\$22,350 for a family of four, \$18,530 for a family of three, \$14,710 for a family of two, or \$10,890 for one person—would you be able to afford the basic necessities that include food, housing, medical care, transportation and child care?

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Here are four situations that relate to poverty. Read each story and respond together to the questions that accompany that story.

1. Gregory W. is a homeless man in Louisiana who was arrested for stealing food from a grocery store. The retail value of the food was \$39. He was assessed \$339 in fines and fees and was jailed. His charges were later changed to community service because he could not pay the fines. But when he could not pay the bus fare to complete his community service, he went back to jail. He spent a total of 198 days behind bars, and his incarceration cost the City of New Orleans \$3,500. (*American Civil Liberties Union, "IN FOR A PENNY: The Rise of America's New Debtor's Prisons."*)

- What would be a fair way to hold this man accountable for his theft?
- When you think about alternative sentencing, what other factors do you think have to be taken into account?
- What alternative approaches can you imagine that would be more equitable?

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2. Jackie is a mother with three young children, ages 2, 5 and 7. She had a good job at a Ford plant, but she lost her job about 16 months ago. She doesn't have any other family to depend on. She's been having problems meeting her bills. Her kids are good kids. For the holidays, Jackie wanted to buy her kids a few items, mostly clothes that they needed. She did not have any money, so she forged a check. She was arrested and convicted. As she does her time in prison, her kids are in foster care. She may never get them back.

- When parents go to prison, what are the effects on their children, their teachers and their schools?
- If you could not provide for the basic needs of your children—for infant formula, to visit a doctor for an ear infection, for basic child care while you work—what steps would you be forced to consider?

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3. *Physicians for A National Health Program* describes a man from Houston, Texas, who was the first in his family to complete college. After his BA, he got professional chef's training, eventually becoming head chef. He built up a custom catering business and employed 25 other people. He married, had two children, and was putting money away for their college funds. He had health insurance, auto insurance, and his own home. One night, on the way home from a catering job, he had an automobile accident, running head on into a commercial flatbed truck, parked and jutting out into the road without lights or blinkers.

He survived but was in the hospital for almost a year. The owner of the truck did not have insurance. Although the man had health insurance, his accumulated out-of-pocket costs far exceeded what he could pay. He declared bankruptcy. Being unable to work, the chef lost his business; his employees lost their jobs; he and his family lost their house; they lost the kids' college fund; and he lost both legs amputated above the knee. When he was finally discharged from the hospital, he wound up in a shelter, where eventually he was able to put his professional chef skills to work in the "soup kitchen."

- Was this a case merely of bad luck?
  - What do you imagine was the impact of this series of catastrophes on this man's children and on the children of his employees? Think about all the implications.
  - Should a person in this situation have to become bankrupt or turn to family if one is so privileged to have family members who could afford to help financially?
  - How might reform of the health care system make a difference in this tragedy?
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4. In the following passage from an August 22, 2004, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* story, the reporter describes the attitudes of two women he met at a southwest Ohio amusement park and their opinions about the upcoming 2004 election:

"The upcoming election isn't so much about Republican vs. Democrat, the women said. It goes deeper. What (the two women) see are two groups of people hopelessly at odds: Patient People vs. Impatient People... The women include themselves and most of their friends and families among the Patient People: They're married because they put a lot into it; they work because they search until they find a job; they saved until they could buy a house; and they pay their bills because they spend only what they can afford... The Impatient People, however, are usually single parents or divorced because they make impulsive decisions; they don't work or don't work hard because they think that life owes them something; they pay rent because they either can't or won't save for a down payment; and they have maxed out credit cards because they want everything immediately..."

- How would these women describe the causes of poverty?
  - What attitudes do these women have about poor people?
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Even though most of us do not set out intentionally to oppress others or to limit their chances and opportunities, our society's widening inequality is not an accident. Our laws and economic structures often disadvantage some and privilege others. Often we even blame poor people themselves when they are the victims of larger social forces. Spend some time reflecting on the ways that our systems and institutions make us all complicit in injustice.

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We often suggest that people in low-wage jobs go back to school for more education that will allow them to get a better job. But if everyone had advanced degrees, we would still need people to do home health care, food service, and many other low-wage jobs. Education can help an individual get a higher-paying job and better life, but will education change these low wage jobs? Does society (do we) have a responsibility to improve, or require employers to improve, low-wage jobs? What is society's responsibility to workers in these jobs?

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People emigrate to the United States to escape dire poverty in their home country. Think and talk about the reasons people are forced to leave their homelands. What is the responsibility of the U.S. to protect the rights of immigrants into the U.S.? How do people in the U.S. benefit from the poverty of people in poor countries and from these nations' lax protection of workers and inadequate protection of the environment?

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What are some specific steps you can take as an individual to improve opportunity for those who experience poverty and inequality? List them. Make sure that your discussion addresses the causes, in addition to the conditions, of poverty and inequality.

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